

A Round-Up of Theories

WARREN COMMISSION'S LONE-ASSASSIN THEORY

Lee Oswald, acting alone, killed President John F. Kennedy, wounded Texas Gov. John Connally, then murdered Dallas Police Officer J. D. Tippit in an escape attempt.

Jack Ruby, acting alone, murdered Oswald.

"No credible evidence" indicated Oswald or Ruby was part of a conspiracy.

Oswald fired three shots at the Kennedy motorcade. One struck Kennedy in the upper back, left an exit wound in the throat, then passed through Connally's torso and right wrist before entering his left thigh. This bullet was later found on a hospital stretcher in almost pristine condition. The second bullet missed. The third struck the back of Kennedy's head, apparently inflicting a mortal wound.

A rifle owned by Oswald and bearing his palm print was found near the window from which the sniper apparently fired. Three empty cartridge cases discovered nearby, plus the nearly pristine bullet and other fragments, matched Oswald's rifle. Witnesses placed Oswald near the window shortly before the assassination. A pistol seized from Oswald during his arrest was identified as the Tippit murder weapon. Oswald lied to the police on substantive matters after his arrest. Seven months before the Kennedy assassination, Oswald tried to kill controversial former Army Gen. Edwin Walker by firing a rifle shot at him.



Jack Ruby

SECOND-GUNMAN THEORY

Numerous conspiracy theorists have argued that Oswald could not have fired all the shots and thus there must have been two — if not more — gunmen.

These theorists challenged the official contention, based on Abraham Zapruder's amateur film of the assassination, that Oswald fired all three shots within 7.9 seconds. They said the weapon was clumsy to fire and Oswald was far from expert. But FBI and military experts testified he was fully capable of firing the shots accurately in 7.9 seconds.

Theorists also argued there was evidence one shot struck Kennedy from the front, not the back. Some claimed a second gunman had fired from a manhole in front of the Kennedy limousine (even though all manholes along a presidential motorcade route are habitually sealed by

the Secret Service). Many speculated that a second gunman had fired from a grassy knoll to the right front of the limousine, where witnesses reported seeing puffs of smoke and other suspicious activity. Photographs taken at the scene were said to show shadowy figures who might have been gunmen. But modern guns do not normally produce puffs of smoke, and no credible physical evidence was ever produced to prove the second-gunman case.

Doctors who treated Kennedy in Dallas or performed the autopsy on his body insisted all his wounds came from shots fired behind him. Recent analysis of the assassination-scene photographs revealed no evidence of a second gunman. Moreover, in response to those who argued that the nearly pristine bullet could not have caused all the wounds reported by the Warren Commission, scientists recently performed neutron analyses on the bullet and on metal fragments recovered from Connally's wrist. They matched perfectly.

THE FOUR-SHOT THEORY

The House Select Committee on Assassinations, preparing to issue a 1979 report concluding that Oswald acted alone, changed its mind at the 11th hour and contended Kennedy "was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy." The turnaround was prompted by electronic analysis of a recording of what purported to be noise picked up by an open police radio near the assassination scene.

It produced a variation on the second-gunman theory — one in which it was claimed that four, not three, shots were fired at the motorcade. Researchers working for the committee contended their electronic analysis had detected the sound of four shots on the recording. On that basis, the committee concluded that Oswald had killed Kennedy but that another gunman had fired simultaneously and missed. No other evidence to prove the second gunman's existence was produced. And the committee's theory was sharply called into question recently when a researcher detected a previously unheard voice on the recording. The voice was identified as that of Dallas Sheriff Bill Decker, who said it was apparent the recording had been made at least a minute and a half after the shooting — for he was giving orders in reaction to the gunfire.

THE DISAPPEARING-BODY THEORY

Author David S. Lifton, who said he spent 15 years researching a 1981 assassination book called "Best Evidence," claimed Kennedy's body was stolen during the six hours between the assassination and the autopsy at Bethesda Naval Hospital. He contended bullets were removed and wounds were altered to conceal the truth about the assassination. Only then, he said, was the body returned to its coffin for the autopsy.

Lifton did not explain precisely how all this could have been done without detection.

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tion by Jacqueline Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Secret Service agents, White House aides and others accompanying the body back to Washington aboard Air Force One.

But, although his seemed one of the more bizarre scenarios, he was far from alone in suggesting that Kennedy's wounds had been distorted. Numerous conspiracy theorists maintained that the wounds had been altered either by the Dallas doctors or those who performed the autopsy.

Over the years, Lifton offered other conspiracy theories. As early as 1967, he told *Esquire* magazine that "prior to the assassination the grassy knoll was excavated from beneath and a system of tunnels and bunkers was built into it. Peepholes covered with grass-mesh camouflage were placed on the sloping surface of the knoll."

THE MOB THEORY

Since both Oswald and Ruby were reported to have underworld connections — and since the Kennedy administration had been waging a publicized war on organized crime — many conspiracy theorists contended the assassination must have been a mob hit. G. Robert Blakey, staff director of the House assassinations committee, said when the committee issued its report: "I am now firmly of the opinion that the mob did it. It is a historical truth."

Ruby, as the operator of a sleazy Dallas strip joint, frequently fraternized with racketeers. Oswald's supposed mob con-



Carlos Marcello

nections, if any, were more tenuous. He was said to have known David Ferrie, a cashiered airline pilot and one-time private detective who was a central figure in former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's discredited assassination investigations. Ferrie, in turn, had represented New Orleans mob boss Carlos Marcello. Both Ferrie and Marcello denied knowing Oswald. But numerous conspiracy theories have centered on Marcello's ordering the assassination — perhaps with the help of his close friend, Florida Mafia boss Santo Trafficante — in retaliation for the Kennedy administration's antimob campaign. Other mob bosses have been named as well by conspiracy theorists.

But no persuasive evidence has been marshaled to prove such speculation. Moreover, both underworld figures and law-enforcement officers have pointed out that the mob normally uses professional hit men — not rank amateurs with

the erratic backgrounds of Oswald and Ruby — to carry out important murders.

THE CASTRO THEORY

While living in New Orleans before moving to Dallas, Oswald distributed handbills attacking United States policy toward Fidel Castro's Cuban regime. The handbills bore the imprint of the local chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee — from all indications a chapter consisting of Lee Harvey Oswald.

After the Kennedy assassination, a Dallas woman reported she had once been visited by anti-Castro Cubans who introduced her to an American she later recognized as Oswald. She said the Cubans told her the American was trying to persuade anti-Castro groups to kill Kennedy because of his "reaction to the Bay of Pigs."

Meanwhile, congressional committees reported uncovering evidence that the CIA — with the help of underworld figures — had plotted assassination attempts on Castro. West Coast mobster John Roselli, who testified about such plots to the Senate intelligence committee in 1976, was later found murdered and dismembered.

For these reasons and others, there has been widespread speculation that Castro ordered Kennedy's assassination. In an interview with representatives of the House assassinations committee, Castro called the idea insane. "From the ideological point of view, it was a tremendous insanity," he said. "That would have been the most perfect pretext for the United States to invade our country,

which is what I have tried to prevent for all these years."

THE RIGHT-WING PLOT THEORY

One conspiracy theory current in the immediate aftermath of the assassination — but little heard in later years — was that right-wing business titans (Texas oilmen were usually mentioned) had ordered the assassination to replace Kennedy with the more conservative Lyndon Johnson.

The theory held that some Dallas millionaire, representing a loose confederation of like-minded entrepreneurs, had recruited Oswald — probably using several layers of middlemen. It was no secret that Kennedy's policies had made him unpopular in such circles; anti-Kennedy propaganda greeted his arrival in Dallas. Some of the more exuberant theorists even went so far to accuse Johnson of complicity in the plot.

But no evidence of any probity was ever found to support the right-wing theory — much less the Johnson corollary. As president, Johnson carried out Kennedy's policies and, in fact, was able to push through Congress some programs Kennedy could not.

In appointing the Warren Commission, Johnson hoped to put at rest public doubts about the assassination. Later, however, he came to have his own doubts — telling intimates he suspected there was a plot. He never dignified with a denial the notion that he might have been involved in such a plot.

— Michael Dorman